

LINCOLN ON HIS OWN STORY-TELLING

INCLUDING AN INCIDENT OF SECRET HISTORY CONCERNING
THE RELATIONS OF THE GOVERNOR OF NEW YORK
AND THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

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THOSE who know personally the courtly and gentle soldier and veteran civil-service reformer who writes this paper of reminiscence, will understand why so significant an interview with the great President has hitherto escaped public record, notwithstanding that Lincoln's words were written down the very night of their utterance. Of the value of the incident there is no question. Others have given their view of Lincoln's story-telling faculty and habit, of his sense of humor and appreciation of the dramatic, and of his use of his accomplishment for purposes of more importance than amusement; but here we have Lincoln's own comment on one of his chief and most interesting characteristics.—THE EDITOR.



ORATIO SEYMOUR, the Democratic candidate, was elected Governor of the State of New York in November, 1862, by a majority of 10,752 votes over General James S. Wadsworth, his Republican competitor, and he assumed office on January 1, 1863.

Governor Seymour was for over twenty years the most popular and influential member of the Democratic party in New York State. He was the candidate of his party for Governor in 1850, and was defeated by only 262 votes. He was again nominated for the same office in 1852, and was elected. In 1862, however, his success was a great surprise to the mass of the Republicans. Their candidate, General Wadsworth, a member of an old and reputable family, had been an active Brigadier-General in the field almost from the outbreak of hostilities, and had rendered great and recognized services,¹

and seemed to be an ideal candidate in every respect. After their first shock, they attributed their defeat to the absence in the field of a much larger proportion of members of their party than that of their opponents. This disparity between parties did not exist, and the defeat of their well-equipped candidate was attributable to causes common in the hidden machinations of our partizan politics.

The Republican party was originally organized by a coalition of the greater part of the Whig party in the North and of the Free-Soil Democrats. In New York State this alliance was very unpleasant to many of the Whigs who participated in it, and particularly so to that part of them known as "Silver Grays," whose affiliations and sympathies with the Southern wing of their old party were very strong. Many of these went over to the Democratic party, and others joined grudgingly in a union with long-time enemies. General Wadsworth was one of

¹ At a later date General Wadsworth was Military Governor of the District of Columbia; participated in the battles of Fredericksburg and Gettysburg, and

was in command of the fourth division of the 5th corps of the Army of the Potomac when he was killed in the battle of the Wilderness in May, 1864.

the "Free-Soilers" who aided in the organization of the new Republican party in 1854, and his Whig enemies in it saw an opportunity to wipe out some old scores by his defeat. It was one of those miserable pieces of deceit and treachery in our partizan warfare that have been frequently enacted throughout the country.

The Republicans, ignorant of these devices, and sore in their rebuff, declared that the result of the election was inimical to the vast task of President Lincoln's administration in suppressing the rebellion by the Southern States, and derided the Democrats, a large part of whom had avowed their support of Mr. Seymour to be in the interest of "a more vigorous prosecution of the war." The Republican papers accused the Governor of a lukewarm attitude, and asserted that he would be indifferent in the raising of new regiments and the recruitment of those in the field. The Governor, a sensitive and conscientious man, was much distressed by these gratuitous imputations, but amid the distractions of an excited legislative session, he saw no personal opportunity to correct these detractors in a dignified manner.

Late in April an act was passed offering a State bounty of seventy-five dollars to each recruit and payable also to those who had enlisted since the discontinuance of the previous bounties in September, 1862. After the final adjournment of the legislature, Colonel John D. Van Buren, a member of the Assembly from Orange County, was appointed Paymaster-General. There were many men in the field to whom the bounty was due, and those in the fortifications about Washington were particularly clamorous for payment. The Governor directed Col. Van Buren to go to Washington and make these payments, and as the latter was not versed in such transactions, and as I had had a large experience the previous year in this line of duty, I was detailed to accompany him.¹ Col. Van Buren was not only a political, but also a warm personal, friend of the Governor, as also a man of fine accomplishments, and the Governor took this occasion to make a formal representation by us to the President of his purpose

in all lawful ways to aid the General government and carry out the policy avowed by his supporters before his election to sustain "a more vigorous prosecution of the war." He had a cousin, Major——, an officer of the regular army, at that time on duty at Washington, to whom he wrote a letter requesting him to procure us an audience with the President.

I will not narrate here our many interesting experiences and observations in Washington, where great excitement pervaded every class and quarter when we arrived there on the evening of June 22. About a week earlier General Hooker had started with his army from the Rappahannock on that notable march that was paralleled by Lee's on the right bank of the Potomac until they finally converged at Gettysburg. As an instance of the expectations of the "secession" element, we heard, on our first day, the barkeeper in Willard's Hotel offer a large bet that General Lee would eat his Fourth of July dinner in that house.

At the instance of Major——, we made two attempts to see the President at the White House, but were told that he was too closely engaged to see any one. Colonel Van Buren and I appreciated the awful burden the great leader was then bearing, and felt that we could not insist upon an audience. Major——was enraged by what he assumed was an indignity to his cousin, the Governor. He was a type of one class of regular army officers of the old days, brusque, with many oaths and a thirst for strong drink.

On the evening of Friday, June 26, Colonel Van Buren, his son, then on a visit to Washington, and I were occupying chairs on the sidewalk in front of Wormley's Hotel, when Major——, arrayed in full uniform, drove up in a hack; exclaiming: "Put on your toggerly," meaning our dress uniforms; "we are going to see Old Abe."

We asked for explanations, since we knew the President spent his nights at a cottage on the beautiful grounds of the Soldiers' Home, about two miles north of the city, and it seemed the height of impertinence to pursue the fagged official to his chosen retreat. Had we known then, as we did later, that it was the evening

¹ I was Assistant-Inspector-General on the staff of Governor Morgan, Mr. Seymour's predecessor, and occupied that position until January 1, 1869.

of the day when he had resolved upon that desperate military expedient, the change of the commander of an army almost upon the eve of a momentous conflict, we should have refused to go. The Major said: "Horatio wrote me that you were to have an interview with the President, and, — —, you are bound to have one!" His persistence finally overcame our protests, and we hastened to put on our uniforms and to start, young Van Buren accompanying us.

It was a bright night and about nine o'clock when we turned from the highway into the winding roads of the Soldiers' Home. We saw gleaming amid the shrubbery in all directions the bayonets of the soldiers who guarded the President's residence. There were at that time many fears expressed that a cavalry raid would be made for the purpose of capturing the President.

We drew up in front of a cottage before which a sentry was walking to and fro. To him Major—— gave some password, and we alighted with renewed trepidation, for the aspect of the house indicated retirement for the night. The Major rang the bell, and after a while the door was opened by a man-servant, whom the Major peremptorily directed to inform the President that some gentlemen, specially empowered by Governor Seymour of New York, desired to wait upon him. The servant hesitated, but the Major's manner was so urgent that we were admitted to a dimly lighted hall, and ushered thence into a dark parlor, where the servant lighted a chandelier and departed with our cards.

During our drive, Colonel Van Buren and I had recognized the fact that the indomitable Major had primed himself thoroughly with his favorite whisky, as evidenced by his constant stroking of his heavy beard, a trick that denoted alcoholic repletion.

After the servant returned and announced that the President would receive us, we sat for some time in painful silence. At length we heard slow, shuffling steps come down the uncarpeted stairs, and the President entered the room as we respectfully rose from our seats. That pathetic figure has ever remained indelible in my memory. His tall form was bowed, his hair disheveled; he wore no necktie or

collar, and his large feet were partly incased in very loose, heelless slippers. It was very evident that he had got up from his bed or had been very nearly ready to get into it when we were announced, and had hastily put on some clothing and those slippers that had made the *flip-flap* sounds on the bare stairs.

It was the face that, in every line, told the story of anxiety and weariness. The drooping eyelids, looking almost swollen; the dark bags beneath the eyes; the deep marks about the large and expressive mouth; the flaccid muscles of the jaws, were all so majestically pitiful that I could almost have fallen on my knees and begged pardon for my part in the cruel presumption and impudence that had thus invaded his repose. As we were severally introduced, the President shook hands with us, and then took his seat on a hair-cloth-covered sofa beside the Major, while we others sat on chairs in front of him. Colonel Van Buren, in fitting words, conveyed the message from Governor Seymour, asking the President in Governor Seymour's name, to pay no attention to newspaper statements as to the Governor's unfriendliness, and assured the President of the Governor's fixed intention to fulfil any constitutional call upon him for funds to support the Government. The President replied that he had attached no importance to the rumors referred to, and that he needed no formal assurances that the Governor would do all in his power to aid him.

The merely formal talk being over, something was said about the critical condition of military matters, and the President observed that he had no fears about the safety of Washington, and was certain that the attempted invasion of the Northern States would be arrested. He said the latest intelligence from the Army of the Potomac was favorable, but gave no details, and it was not until the next day that we learned that General Meade had succeeded General Hooker.

A little pause in the conversation ensued. The gaunt figure of the President had gradually slid lower on the slippery sofa, and his long legs were stretched out in front, the loose slippers half-fallen from his feet, while the drowsy eyelids had almost closed over his eyes, and his jaded features had taken on the sugges-

tion of relaxation in sleep. I repeat that I never think of this noble man's personality without recalling him at that moment of supreme danger to the Republic and without seeing again that sad, worn countenance of the man who bore with such courage and patience his heavy burdens.

Deeply moved by the President's evident fatigue, and by his cordial treatment of us in spite of our presumptuous call, Colonel Van Buren and I were about rising to make our adieux when, to our dismay, the Major slapped the President on his knee and said:

"Mr. President, tell us one of your good stories."

If the floor had opened and dropped me out of sight, I should have been happy.

The President drew himself up, and turning his back as far as possible upon the Major, with great dignity addressed the rest of us, saying: "I believe I have the popular reputation of being a storyteller, but I do not deserve the name in its general sense; for it is not the story itself, but its purpose, or effect, that interests me. I often avoid a long and useless discussion by others or a laborious

explanation on my own part by a short story that illustrates my point of view. So, too, the sharpness of a refusal or the edge of a rebuke may be blunted by an appropriate story, so as to save wounded feeling and yet serve the purpose. No, I am not simply a story-teller, but storytelling as an emollient saves me much friction and distress." These are almost his exact words, of which I made a record that very night.

When the President finished, we arose and made our salutations, and withdrew, our last view of our great leader being of a countenance gracious, but inexpressibly sad.

I have told this adventure to many friends, some of whom have asked why I did not publish it. For many years I was loth to make a public statement of even unconsenting presence at such treatment of one whom the nation recognizes as ranking as high as Washington in our political history and venerates as a martyr. But I have been persuaded that this explanation by our beloved President of the great solace he derived from his storytelling should now be generally known.



"A MAN MAY DIE"

BY P. H. SAVAGE

A MAN may die
 In the infinitesimal part of a second.
 A life may come
 In a grain, tiny, touched by one drop from a shower.
 But what is a death?
 The slip of a soul by the hand of God beckoned.
 Is a life then so small?
 Each a world to itself, feeling, breathing God's power.
 Bid it come, let it go; so 't is ordered below;
 But you, work, know your soul everyway;
 Then a smile, slip away, day to night, night to day;
 Lift your eyes; straight ahead; now you know.